Coparenting and children's adjustment to divorce: the role of geographical distance from fathers

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ABSTRACT

After divorce, shorter distances between parents' homes are often seen as facilitating nonresident fathers' involvement, good coparenting practices and children's well-being. However, empirical evidence is scarce and the direction of causality remains unclear, as uninvolved fathers due to paternal disinterest, maternal gatekeeping or interparental conflict are more likely to move farther away from their children. Based on a probability sample of 144 divorced mothers of school-aged children living in Geneva, Switzerland, this study shows that both maternal promotion of the father-child relationship (cohesive coparenting) and fathers' residential proximity have positive and independent effects on children's emotional and behavioural outcomes. Although frequent father-child contacts by phone or emails can substitute for distance in coparenting, geographical proximity still matters for fathers' contribution to children's well-being. Overall, this study recommends that spatial and mobility dimensions should receive more attention in divorce research.

Keywords: distance, proximity, nonresident fathers, father-child relationship, divorce, children's adjustment, coparenting, telecommunications.

INTRODUCTION

Norms and policies about fathers' role in post-separation families have changed over the last few decades. Policy-makers emphasise shared parenting between ex-partners to encourage nonresident parents, usually fathers, to play a more central role in their children's lives. Involved fatherhood is mainly advocated to ensure children's best interests and is seen as one major solution to children's adjustment to divorce (Cabrera & Peters, 2000; Wilson 2006).

After a family disruption, coparenting – i.e. how parents coordinate, and cooperate in, their parenting roles – is likely to represent the primary, and sometimes the only, interaction between ex-partners. Prior research on post-divorce families has shown that the quality (rather than the quantity) of coparenting relationships is important for children to benefit from the presence of their nonresident fathers (Dunn, 2004; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992, Nielsen, 2011). Yet, evidence has demonstrated that many parents rather engage in *parallel parenting* and collaborate little with one another in their childrearing practices (Arendell, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Sullivan, 2008). Recent studies in Australia, some US states and countries of Northern Europe suggest, however, a substantial increase in coparenting (Nielsen, 2011; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). The extent to which these findings reflect a general trend in Western countries, including Switzerland, is an open question. In Switzerland, joint legal custody, i.e. the right and responsibility for both parents to make major decisions concerning the child, has been facilitated since the divorce law reform in 2000 and

joint physical custody has been made possible when both parents request it. Despite these changes, mothers in Switzerland still carry the major responsibility for childcare after divorce, reflecting the gendered organisation of labour during marriage. Child custody falls first to mothers and joint physical custody, although increasing, remains rare (estimated around 5-10%).

In this context, geographical distance between parents' homes is often seen as an obstacle to high-quality coparenting relationship and a risk to children's development (Wallerstein & Tanke, 1996). In California, for example, the law restricts custodial parents to move away children from the other parent (McKee 2004). In Switzerland, parents with joint legal custody have responsibilities for staying close to each other. And while courts usually allow custodial parents to migrate with the child, non-custodial parents can object to the relocation for the sake of children (ATF 5A_369/2012).

Nevertheless, little evidence exists on how the distance between parents' homes relate to post-divorce coparenting and children's adjustment. While many studies on nonresident fathering used geographical distance as a control variable, few have explored the effect of distance *per se*. Previous studies merely showed that distance was associated with lower levels of father face-to-face contact with mothers and children (e.g. Braver et al., 1993; Smyth et al., 2001), which was found to be a weak predictor of children's adjustment to divorce (Gilmore, 2006; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). A second research limitation is the difficulty to grasp the complex interrelations between geographical distance and coparenting. Most studies focus on single causality, usually the negative impact of fathers' distance on contact with mothers and children (e.g. Cooksey & Craig, 1998). However, the direction of causality is unclear, as poor coparenting, like maternal gatekeeping or interparental conflict, may encourage divorcees to move far away from the other parent. Finally, social sciences tend to emphasise everyday physical interaction, neglecting the important role of telecommunications and physical mobility to maintain good-quality distant relationships (Larsen et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). While geographical proximity facilitates support and care (Magdol & Bessel, 2003; Mulder & van der Meer 2009), communication technologies play an important role for coparenting (Ganong et al., 2012; Miller, 2009) and for creating feelings of closeness and connection in geographically dispersed families (Christensen, 2009, Kennedy et al., 2008).

This paper aims to address these gaps by examining how geographical distance between parents' homes relates to post-divorce coparenting and children's adjustment in a sample of 144 divorced or separated mothers of school-aged children living in Geneva, Switzerland. We first examined the pattern of relationships between distance, face-to-face and technology-mediated father-child contact frequency and cohesive coparenting (maternal promotion of the father-child relationship). We then evaluated whether distance and cohesive coparenting impact children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Results showed that (1) cohesive coparenting relates more to frequent contact by phone or emails between fathers and children than residential proximity does; (2) both cohesive coparenting and fathers' proximity have positive and independent effects on children's adjustment. Children whose fathers live nearby exhibit less behavioural difficulties and more pro-social behaviour than children whose fathers live far away. Cohesive coparenting predicts lower behavioural difficulties, lower hyperactivity difficulties and lower difficulties with peers.

BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Children's adjustment to divorce: the importance of high-quality relationships with nonresident fathers

Divorce research (largely from the US) shows that children in post-divorce families, on average, have lower cognitive and behavioural outcomes than comparable children raised in two biological parent families (Amato, 2001; Coleman et al., 2000, Sun & Li, 2002). Empirical evidence demonstrates, however, no clear direct relationship between frequent contact with nonresident fathers (including joint physical custody) and better children's adjustment to divorce (Gilmore, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Fehlberg et al. 2011). The frequency of face-to-face contact is imprecise, as longer visits and telecommunications may compensate for low contact, particularly when fathers live far apart (Cashmore et al., 2008; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer, 2000). More importantly, research suggests that father-child and father-mother relationship quality matters rather than the amount of contact. Various studies have shown that good relationships between nonresident fathers and children, in particular high support, responsive fathering and non-coercive control, benefit children's emotional and behavioural well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Gilmore, 2006; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Conversely, frequent contact with fathers is damaging to children when paternal relationships are poor or abusive and when parents are in conflict (Dunn, 2004; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Amato and Rezac's classic study (1994) demonstrated that frequent contact between boys and nonresident fathers increased the risk of behavioural problems when interparental conflict was high, and decreased this risk when interparental conflict was low. The tendency was similar for girls, albeit not significant. The direction of causality remains, however, unclear between the amount and quality of contact between fathers and children. Dunn et al.'s longitudinal study (2004) found some evidence that nonresident fathers had more frequent contact with their children as a result of the positive, affectionate relationship between them, rather than the contrary.

Coparenting

A growing literature on children's adjustment has highlighted the importance of coparenting as a distinct dimension from both the quality of the parental relationship and parenting behaviour (McHale, 1997, Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). A high-quality post-divorce coparenting, characterised by mutual support, good communication and acceptance of each parent's role, was found to predict higher relationship quality between fathers and children (Dunn et al., 2004; Sobolewski & King, 2005) and children's adjustment (Dunn, 2004; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992, Nielsen, 2011). In a meta-analysis, Whiteside & Becker (2000) showed that parental cooperation is associated with children's social and cognitive skills. In addition, Carlson et al. (2008) demonstrated in a large longitudinal study that high-quality coparenting predicts nonresident fathers' future involvement with their children.

The present study focuses on one dimension of coparenting: the degree to which mothers promote a positive image of fathers and positive interactions between fathers and children in the child's presence, called *cohesive coparenting*. Empirical studies on this coparenting dimension is a relatively new research trend compared to parental cooperation and support, childrearing agreements or, conversely, parental dissonance and conflict (McHale, 1997). Direct parent-to-child communications about the other parent and the integrity of the family unit was related to children's adjustment to divorce. Children manifest higher symptoms of anxiety and depression when parents speak

disparagingly of the other parent in front of children (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Parents regularly contradicting each other's decisions in the child's presence may foster loyalty conflicts and identity confusion in children (Emery, 1999). Some pioneering works on young children in first-time families suggest that children show more positive social and emotional development when parents promote a positive image of the family unit and the other parent – even in that parent's absence (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; McHale et al., 2007). The direct mother-to-child communications about nonresident fathers draws particular attention to *maternal gatekeeping* behaviour. Previous research showed that resident mothers play an important role in influencing children's views of fathers and in supporting or hindering the amount and quality of contact between nonresident fathers and children (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Distance between parents' homes

While fathers' residential proximity has proved to play a central role for keeping regular contact with children and mothers (Braver et al., 1993; Smyth et al., 2001), little is known about how fathers' proximity relates to coparenting, the father-child and father-mother relationship quality and children's adjustment. Apart from studies comparing children's residential arrangements, divorce research has rarely focused on spatial aspects, so that surveys, at best, used distance between parents' homes as a control variable. This is unfortunate, as distance both shapes and reveals post-divorce family organisation, practices and norms.

Existing literature suggests that there is a great diversity of geographical arrangements following a divorce and remarriage (Castren, 2008; Martin, 2001). In a longitudinal study of post-divorce families in France, Martin (1997) identified, in particular, two opposite patterns. At one extreme, parents negotiated the terms of their separation and chose to live close by to facilitate children's contact with both parents, sometimes with joint physical custody arrangements. Possible new partners of resident parents played more of a complementary role than a substitution role regarding the child. At the other extreme, divorcees rapidly moved out of the area to stress their autonomy from their former partners and their aspiration to build a 'new' family life. In case of remarriage, new partners of resident parents largely replaced nonresident parents in parental practices.

Empirical evidence suggests that children's socio-emotional development would benefit twofold from fathers' proximity: closer homes reduce the disruptive effect caused by parental separation and predicts fathers' involvement in (co)parenting practices. Previous research in the US showed, for example, that nonresident fathers living closer to their children are more likely to pay child support (Manning & Smock, 2000; Seltzer, 2000) and more willing to be involved in children's lives than when the distance is greater (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). A short distance between parental homes may be particularly important for young children, where telecommunications cannot substitute for face-to-face contact to share emotional support. In a qualitative study on technology use in post-divorce families, Yarosh & Abowd (2009) showed that both parents and children were dissatisfied with communication technologies and missed shared activities and routines. Parents considered phone conversations a limited tool for staying aware of, and involved in, children's lives. Other qualitative studies on divorced parents suggested that the proximity of ex-partners' homes facilitate parental cooperation and coordination in time and space, such as picking up/dropping off children at school (Schmitz, 2000; Smyth, 2004; Tazi-Preve et al., 2007). These studies showed that spatial proximity limits the stress resulting from travel by the child and parents and enables children to stay in their familiar surroundings. A walking or cycling distance also allows young children to travel

independently and safely between the two homes. Based on a large Norwegian sample, Jensen (2009) showed that children living close to both parents' homes had more influence on the visiting arrangement and were more satisfied with it than commuting children. They also experienced their parents' conflicts less often.

However, there is also reason to expect that fathers' proximity contributes little to coparenting and children's adjustment. First, regular visits and frequent phone or e-mail conversations could partly substitute for distance enabling fathers to engage with mothers and children. In a qualitative study of about 50 divorced parents, Gagnon et al. (2012) suggested that communication technologies facilitate joint decisions when parents living apart are in effective coparenting relationships. Miller (2009) also showed that e-mails is a privileged mean of communication for divorced parents, because e-mails avoid direct interaction with ex-partners and leave a written record of decisions made. Second, it is uncertain that residential proximity predicts fathers' relationship *quality* with mothers and children. Certainly, mothers may be discouraged from moving away when they have high-quality coparenting relationships with fathers and perceive fathers' proximity as beneficial to children. Likewise, fathers having an affectionate relationship with their children may desire to stay geographically close. Nevertheless, fathers living nearby do not have necessarily good (co)parenting skills. Moreover, staying or moving out of the area after union dissolution is influenced by various reasons besides the father-child and father-mother relationships, such as a job, the housing market characteristics or the location of a new partner and kin (Feijten & van Ham, 2008; Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2008). Although rare, long-distance moves following a separation are often explained by distant workplaces and distant kin (Mulder & Malmberg, 2011; Mulder & Wagner, 2012). In particular, divorced mothers of small children tend to move closer to distant kin in a situation of greater support needs (Flowerdew et al., 1999, Grundy, 1992). This suggests that the geographical distance alone does not necessarily interfere with effective coparenting relationships and significant fathers' involvement.

Finally, some research evidence suggests that fathers' proximity may have a detrimental effect on children's adjustment. Close proximity and co-responsibility between parents might create more room for parental conflict and negativity. In turn, residential proximity combined with a high degree of disagreement, resentment or conflict between ex-partners might increase stress and disruption for children. In such situations, mothers may perceive fathers' proximity negatively, leading to accusation of 'surveillance' and interference. According to this perspective, divorce demonstrates (or contributes to) couples' poor skills at coparenting, making post-divorce proximity and parental collaboration irrelevant for children's adjustment. Frequent moves between the two residences might also be more unsettling for children, who have to adjust to two different sets of rules and routines (Lamb et al., 1997). In support of this hypothesis, two large-scale longitudinal studies based on registry data in Norway and Denmark showed that children who lived closer to their fathers after divorce had subsequently lower educational outcomes than those living more distant (Kalil et al., 2011; Rasmussen & Stratton, 2012). Rasmussen & Stratton (2012) also observed that fathers' proximity increased the risk of criminal behaviour in the case of girls, but had no effect on health outcomes. In Kalil et al. (2011), the negative effect of proximity was particularly strong when fathers were highly-educated. Based on complementary survey data, these latter authors concluded that while highly-educated fathers living closer to their children probably had more child contact, they also had more post-divorce conflict with their ex-wives, leading to higher disruption and lower

educational outcomes in children. However, neither of these studies examined directly how distance, parental conflict and children's outcomes interact.

Hypothesis

The present study first examines the pattern of relationships between distance, face-to-face and technology-mediated father-child contact frequency and cohesive coparenting. We expect, overall, cohesive coparenting when fathers are in immediate vicinity, because parents are more likely to stay geographically close when they coparent. In this situation, mothers are more likely to trust and promote fathers in their parenting role. In turn, short distances between parents' homes might facilitate effective collaboration and communication between ex-partners. By contrast, mothers may perceive long distances as a sign of disengagement when fathers moved out of the area, which can discourage mothers to make an extra effort to maintain coparenting practices at-a-distance. However, we also expect that frequent technology-mediated conversations between fathers and children can partly substitute for distance regarding coparenting. In particular, mothers might be willing to promote remote fathers who contact frequently their children via telecommunication, because these behaviours demonstrate fathers' emotional support and concerns about children's everyday lives despite the geographical distance. Frequent conversations by phone or Skype between fathers and children might also be combined with parental discussion about children's needs, which can contribute to cohesive coparenting. Finally, compared with in-person contacts, frequent contact via communication technologies may create less opportunity for parental conflict and accusation of 'surveillance'. We assume multiple directions of causality, as mothers may be more willing to promote fathers living nearby and having frequent contact with their children, while, at the same time, fathers are more likely to stay in the same area and in close contact with their children when mothers promote fathers in their parenting role.

The study then evaluates whether fathers' residential proximity impacts on children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. The existing literature leads us to hypothesise that fathers' proximity combined with cohesive coparenting benefits children's adjustment. When parents engage in coparenting practices and avoid high-conflict situations, fathers' presence is likely to be promoted by mothers. Likewise, mothers are likely to promote fathers when they perceive fathers' proximity as beneficial for the child. This would minimise stress for children and reduce their emotional and behavioural difficulties. Moreover, in case of cohesive coparenting, a short distance between parents' homes is more likely to result from an arrangement of both parents to live close to each other to facilitate fathers' involvement in their children's lives than in situations of poor coparenting. This would increase fathers' ability and motivation to contribute to children's needs. The hypothesis posits an *interaction effect* of fathers' proximity and cohesive coparenting on children's adjustment. However, the direction of causality might be reversed. Nonresident fathers may well coparent and stay in proximity of their children as a result of children's emotional and behavioural well-being, rather than the contrary (see in particular Dunn et al. 2004).

METHODS

Data

This paper is based on data from the Swiss research project 'Social capital and family processes as predictors of stepfamily outcomes' (Widmer & Favez, 2011). The sample included 150 mothers of Geneva living on a regular basis with at least one biological child aged 5-14 years from a former relationship and a stable partner (married, cohabiting or spending at least three nights a week at her home). A survey institute randomly selected respondents from the Swiss telephone directory listings and identified eligible mothers based on brief screening phone interviews. Researchers then interviewed in person mothers in their homes or at the university, based on a standardised questionnaire, between 2009 and 2010. Respondents and their co-resident partners may have had other children in the interim, either with the current partner or another, living with them or elsewhere. When mothers had more than one eligible child, the oldest child was identified as the target child. Children could be in shared residence arrangements. The final analytical sample included 144 respondents, as six mothers did not know the whereabouts of their children's fathers at the time of the interview. Because these fathers were probably no longer in contact with their children, this particular post-divorce scenario may have been undercounted in the analysis. These data suffer from two major limitations: the small sample size and the exclusive reliance on mothers' reports. Although unfortunate, we believe that the importance of the research aims and the scarcity of rich data in this domain outweigh reservations about data limitations.

Variables

Fathers' residential proximity. Compared with the USA or larger Western European countries, Switzerland is a small and densely populated country with a low mobility rate, where family members live relatively close to one another. We used a road distance matrix between municipality centroids (of which there are about 2500) to infer the geographical distance (in kilometres) between parental homes based on postcodes of respondents and nonresident fathers, as reported by respondents. Many fathers lived in the same neighbourhood as their children, so that scores were skewly distributed (skewness=4.38; Shapiro-Wilk=.46; $p<.01$). We recoded the distance into three categories: 0-6 km (walking/cycling distance, 6 km=median), 6-50 km (within one-hour driving distance) and 50 km or more. Fathers living abroad (n=13; excepted French territorial units bordering Geneva) belonged to the latter category. Similar cutoffs were identified as 'distance decay' in family support exchange in Dutch studies (Knijn & Liefbroer, 2006; Mulder & van der Meer, 2009). Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the independent variables used in the analysis. Almost half (49.3%) of nonresident fathers lived within walking/cycling distance of their children, nearly one third (30.6%) within a one-hour driving distance and one fifth (20.1%) farther away.

Frequency of contact. Mothers reported the frequency of *face-to-face contact* and *other contact (e.g. phone, e-mail)* between nonresident fathers and children. The latter might have been difficult to determine, because children, in particular young adolescents, are extensively using individual mobile phones and personal computers. Response categories were 1 = *everyday or nearly everyday*, 2 = *once or twice a week*, 3 = *once or twice a month*, 4 = *less often* and 5 = *never or nearly never*. Because of the small number in the fourth category, the two last categories were merged together for both types of contact (*less than monthly*). Since few mothers declared daily face-to-face contact between fathers and children (which is strongly related to shared custody arrangements), the two first

categories were merged together for this type of contact (*weekly or more*). Table 1 shows that more than half (53.5%) of nonresident fathers had at least weekly face-to-face contact with their children, less than third (29.2%) had monthly face-to-face contact and one sixth (17.4%) had less than monthly face-to-face contact. One fifth (21%) of fathers had daily technology-mediated contact with their children, one third (32.2%) had weekly contact, one sixth (17.5%) had monthly contact and nearly one third (29.4%) had less than monthly contact with them by phone or e-mails.

Cohesive coparenting. Mothers were asked to rate their own proactive commitment to promoting a positive image of fathers and positive interactions between fathers and children in the child's presence. Items were based on mothers' interaction with their ex-partners and children when all three were physically present (public or 'overt' coparenting behaviour) and communication with the child about the other parent when no other family members were present (private or 'covert' coparenting behaviour) (McHale, 1997). The questions were as follows: *How often in a typical moment, when all three of you are together, do you*: (1) *make an affirmative or complimentary remark about [child] to your ex-partner? (e.g. Did you see what [child] has done?)*; (2) *Make an affirmative or complimentary remark about your ex-partner to [child]? (e.g. It's true that daddy is really good at that!)*; (3) *Say or do something to invite, facilitate or promote an affectionate or pleasant exchange between your ex-partner and [child]? (e.g. Show dad what you drew. Let dad play.)*; *How often in a typical week, when you and your child are alone, do you: (4) Make a comment such as to enhance [child]'s mental image of your ex-partner (e.g. Daddy loves you really very much. Daddy is proud of you)?*; (5) *Make a remark to invoke or include your ex-partner in a positive way? (e.g. I bet your dad really would love to see it.)*. Response categories ranged from 1 = *absolutely never* to 7 = *nearly constantly (once or twice per hour).* Scores of the five questions were summed and recoded into low (5-9), medium (9-16) and high (16-35) cohesive coparenting. Table 1 shows that less than a quarter (22.2%) of mothers was classified in high coparenting, one third (35.4%) in medium coparenting and less than half (42.4%) in low coparenting.

Children's emotional and behavioural well-being. The degree of emotional and behavioural difficulty in children was measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997, 1999). The SDQ scale consists of 25 items divided into five subscales of five items. Positively worded items are printed here in italics.

1) Emotional symptoms scale: (1a) Often complains of headaches, stomachs or sickness; (1b) Many worries, often seems worried; (1c) Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful; (1d) Nervous or clingy in new situations; easily loses confidence; (1e) Many fears, easily scared.
2) Conduct difficulties scale: (2a) Often has temper tantrums or is hot-tempered; (2b) *Generally obedient, usually does what adults request*; (2c) Often fights with other children or bullies them; (2d) Often lies or cheats; (2e) Steals from home, school or elsewhere.
3) Hyperactivity scale: (3a) Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long; (3b) Constantly fidgeting or squirming; (3c) Easily distracted, concentration wanders; (3d) *Thinks things out before acting*; (3e) *Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span*.
4) Peer difficulties scale: (4a) Rather solitary, tends to play alone; (4b) *Has at least one good friend*; (4c) *Generally liked by other children*; (4d) Picked on or bullied by other children; (4e) Gets along better with adults than with other children.

5) Pro-social scale: (5a) *Considerate of other people's feelings*; (5b) *Easily shares with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)*; (5c) *Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill*; (5d) *Kind to younger children*; (5e) *Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)*.

Possible answers were 0 = not true, 1 = somewhat true, 2 = very true. Positively worded items were scored in reverse order. For each subscale, items were totalled and five dummy variables were created by dichotomising at the upper quartile into high versus low difficulties to discriminate children with severe difficulties. Although every child may be affected by some of these difficulties, a high subscale score indicates problematic child development.

Control variables. Other important variables may moderate the effect of fathers' residential proximity on coparenting and children's adjustment. We included the number of years since the separation in three categories (0-5, 6-8, 9+), because residential proximity and contact with nonresident fathers usually decrease over time (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Stephens, 1996). The mean number of years since separation was 7.1 years (Table 1). We also incorporated dummy variables controlling for foreign born (42% for fathers; 30% for mothers, Table 1), because parents born outside Switzerland are likely to differ from native-born Swiss both in their moving and parenting behaviour after separation. We included the age and work status of both parents, known to be related to the propensity of moving over long distances. Moreover, employed and higher income fathers tend to have more frequent contact with children and mothers than unemployed fathers (Braver et al., 1993; Rettig et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 1995). Age was measured in years (M=43.0 for fathers and 39.5 for mothers, Table 1). Fathers' work status was measured as a dummy variable (86.8% employed), while mothers' work status was coded into four categories: unemployed (including housewives, 13.2%), low part-time (14.6%), high part-time (48.6%) and full-time (23.6%). Because fathers' education is generally associated with higher levels of involvement with children and mothers (e.g. Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Rettig et al., 1999), we included a dummy variable indicating whether fathers had a university or advanced vocational degree (ISCED 5-6) (39.6%).. Age of the target child was included as a dummy variable (65.3% were under 12) given its importance for post-divorce adjustment and the mode of contact with nonresident fathers (face-to-face vs. telecommunications). We incorporated the sex of the target child (46.5% were boys), although past research yields mixed results about the effects of this variable (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Cooksey & Craig, 1998). We included a dummy variable indicating whether children were in joint custody (16%) to disentangle the effects of custody arrangements, fathers' proximity and frequency of contact, although custody arrangements appeared to have little impact on children's adjustment (Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Johnston et al., 1991; Buchanan et al., 1996). We incorporated a dummy variable indicating the presence of an agnatic child with another partner (30.6%), as evidence suggests that fathers living with biological children by a new partner are less involved in the lives of children from an earlier union (Bradshaw et al., 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Manning & Smock, 2000; Manning et al., 2003). The presence of other biological children also influences the likelihood of moving. Finally, we used a dummy variable to control for the presence of other children than the target child between respondents and nonresident fathers. About half (47.2%) of mothers had more than one child with the nonresident father. Fathers having more than one child with their ex-partners tend to be more involved in their children's lives than fathers with one child (Cooksey & Craig, 1998) and may well stay geographically closer.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of independent variables	
Distance father-child (%)	
< 6 km	49.3
6-50 km	30.6
> 50 km	20.1
Father-child frequency of face-to-face contact (%)	
Less than monthly	17.4
Monthly	29.2
Weekly or more	53.5
Father-child frequency of telecommunication contact (%)	
Less than monthly	29.4
Monthly	17.5
Weekly	32.2
Daily	21.0
Cohesive coparenting (%)	
Low	42.4
Medium	35.4
High	22.2
Union's characteristics	
Years since separation (%)	
< 6 years	31.9
6-8 years	35.4
> 8 years	32.6
Number of children between ex-partners (%)	
Single child	52.8
2 children or more	47.2
Father's characteristics	
Age (mean)	43.0
Born abroad (%)	
No	58.3
Yes	41.7
Higher education (%)	
No	60.4
Yes	39.6
Work status (%)	
Unemployed	13.2
Employed	86.8
Has a biological child with another partner (%)	
No	69.4
Yes	30.6
Mother's characteristics	
Age (mean)	39.5
Born abroad (%)	
No	70.1
Yes	29.9
Work status (%)	
Full time	23.6

Part time 50-80%	48.6
Part time ≤ 50%	14.6
Unemployed	13.2
Child's characteristics	
Sex (%)	
Boy	46.5
Girl	53.5
Age (%)	
< 12 years	65.3
12 years and more	34.7
Custody arrangement (%)	
Single-mother	84.0
Shared	16.0

Note: Binary indicators for children's difficulties were not included here, as their distribution was 75% (low difficulties) - 25% (high difficulties) by dichotomising at the upper quartile.
Source: 'Social capital and family processes as predictors of stepfamily outcomes' project, 2009-2010.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows results from a first regression model. Parents' and children's characteristics were included as predictors of the distance between parents' homes. Since distance was made ordinal, we ran an ordinal logistic model. The principle of this model is similar to logit models for binary data, as it estimates the odds ratio for each covariate in the model. A cutoff alpha value of .05 was chosen for significance testing. Results indicate that ex-partners having a young child and those sharing custody were more likely to live close to one another than ex-partners having an older child and those with sole-mother custody. The distance between parents' homes was also significantly predicted by parents' work status. Ex-partners lived more often nearby when they were unemployed, confirming that long-distance moves are often related to work. Finally, the older the mothers, the closer they lived to their ex-partners' homes.

Table 2. Ordinal regression of the distance between parents' homes (odds ratio)	
Age father	1.06
Age mother	.75**
Birth abroad father	1.76
Birth abroad mother	.70
Higher education father	.92
Occupation father: paid work	5.79*
Occupation mother	
full time	1.20
part time ≤ 50%	2.26
part time 50-80% (ref.)	1.00
no paid work	0.17**
Shared custody arrangement	0.04**
Sex child (ref.: boy)	1.99

Age child (ref.: 12+ years)	3.31*
Constants	-5.23*
	-3.05
Model -2 log likelihood	232.47
Chi square	50.26
Significance model	.000
Pseudo R square (Nagelkerke)	.35
D*f*	12
N	138

** p<.01 * p<.05

Figure 1 displays results from a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). This method allows us to capture the systemic interdependencies existing between fathers' proximity, cohesive coparenting and father-child contact frequency (face-to-face and through telecommunications), without distinguishing between dependent and independent variables. Time since separation and binary variables indicating whether fathers had a biological child with a new partner and more than one child with respondents were also included in the MCA. This multidimensional scaling technique has seen wide application in the social science (e.g. Roux & Rouanet, 2010). The diagram represents the first two factorial axes derived from a chi-square decomposition of contingency tables. The two axes explained 50% of the total variance. Response categories that are close to one another in the two dimensional space present similar patterns of responses; distant categories have dissimilar patterns. We treated all variables as active, meaning that they contributed to the structure of associations. Scores indicate the contribution of response categories to the corresponding factorial axis.

Results show that cohesive coparenting relates more to frequent phone or e-mail conversations between fathers and children than fathers' residential proximity. In particular, high coparenting and medium coparenting are associated with daily and weekly technology-mediated contact, respectively (top left quadrant of the graph). Conversely, low coparenting is related to fathers having rare contact with their children (both face-to-face and through telecommunications), ex-partners who have been separated for nine years or more and fathers living within one-hour driving distance, rather than fathers living farther away (bottom right quadrant). The diagonal going from the top left of the graph to the bottom right thus differentiates high levels from low levels of cohesive coparenting and father-child telecommunication contact. Distance between parents' homes and fathers' family structure contribute to the second diagonal from the bottom left of the graph to the top right. Shorter distances between parents' homes relate to recent separations, frequent father-child face-to-face contact and situations where nonresident fathers have more than one child with the respondent and no other child with a new partner (bottom left quadrant). At the other extreme of the diagonal (top right quadrant), longer distances between parents' homes relate to fathers having face-to-face contact with their children on a monthly basis, those having biological children with a new partner and one single child with the respondent. Overall, these results indicate that cohesive coparenting and fathers' proximity have distinct patterns of relations to the set of variables included in the model.

Figure 1: Multiple correspondence analysis

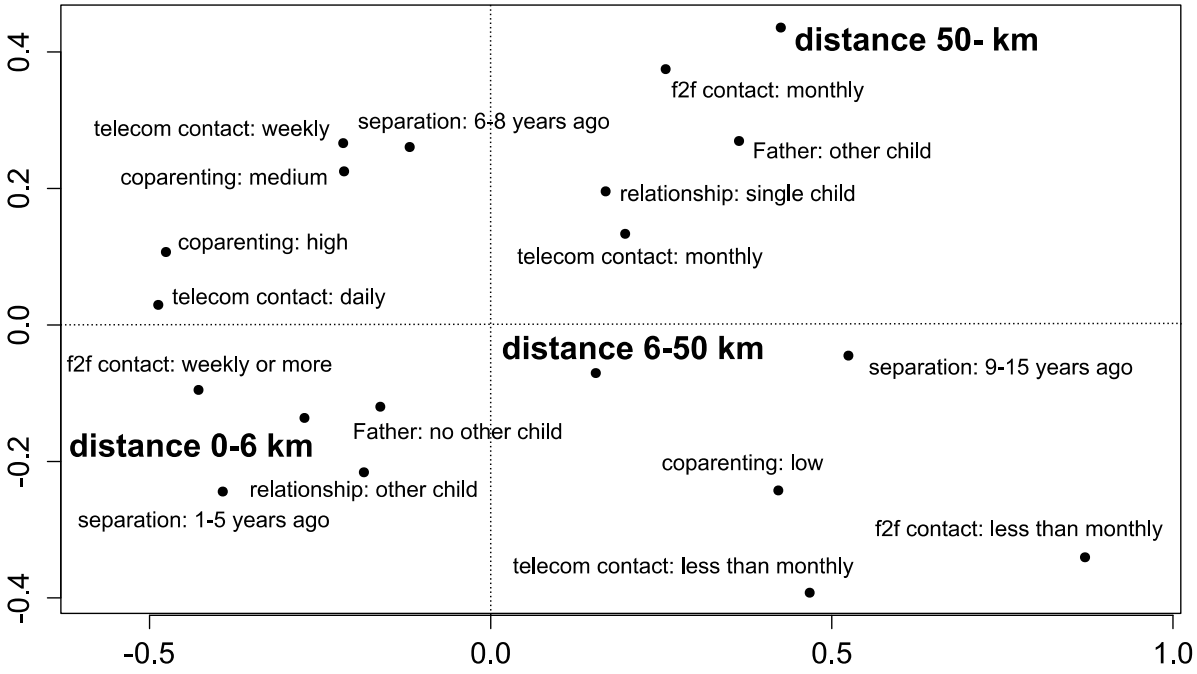

Table 3 shows results from logistic regressions, where we estimate the odds for a child of having severe difficulties. The table presents two models for each difficulty subscale. Model A includes distance between parents' homes and control variables found to be strongly related to distance in the MCA. Model B adds cohesive coparenting, father-child contact frequency and child's characteristics (sex, age and custody arrangement). We initially included and finally excluded an interaction term between distance and coparenting, because it did not improve the model fits. Since face-to-face and telecommunication contact frequencies were highly collinear, both scores were added and recoded into five categories ranging from very high to very low contact frequency.

Results indicate that both coparenting and fathers' proximity have positive and independent effects on children's emotional and behavioural well-being, although the effects vary strongly with the type of difficulties. Children with fathers living nearby had significantly lower odds of having severe behavioural and hyperactivity difficulties and significantly higher odds of having pro-social behaviour. Results for Model B show that the effect of fathers' proximity is larger for conduct difficulties and pro-social behaviour when coparenting is included in the model, while the effect is lower and no longer significant for hyperactivity. Complementary analysis showed that the positive effect of fathers' proximity was stronger in the case of Swiss-born fathers, highly educated fathers and children aged 12 years or more (results not shown). Cohesive coparenting predicts significantly lower levels of behavioural difficulties, hyperactivity difficulties and difficulties with peers. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find any significant interaction effect between fathers' proximity and cohesive coparenting (results not shown). As suggested by past research, neither the father-child contact frequency nor the child custody arrangement significantly influenced levels of children's difficulties.

Table 3. Logistic regression of child's severe difficulties (odds ratio)										
	Emotional difficulties		Behavioural difficulties		Hyperactivity difficulties		Difficulties with peers		Low pro-social behaviour	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Distance father-child: < 6 km (ref.)										
6-50 km	.99	1.19	1.80	1.52	2.42*	1.67	.86	.96	2.54*	2.97*
> 50 km	1.35	1.51	2.62*	3.26*	1.79	2.00	1.29	1.66	1.41	2.03
Number of years since separation: < 6 years (ref.)										
6-8 years	1.05	1.27	.74	.55	1.06	.77	2.78	3.20*	1.04	.79
> 8 years	.94	2.46	.80	.52	1.49	.78	2.03	2.48	1.15	.78
Ex-partners have > 1 child in common	1.66	2.13	1.73	1.17	.48	.28*	.57	.57	1.58	1.21
Father has a biological child with another partner	1.06	.96	.76	.65	1.41	1.27	.43	.43	.59	.61
Father-child frequency of contact: very low (ref.)										
low		3.25		1.49		.56		.98		1.04
medium		1.27		.86		1.58		2.65		.95
high		3.11		2.53		.62		2.40		1.79
very high		2.03		3.13		3.93		1.64		1.56
Coparenting: low (ref.)										
medium		2.27		.41		.38		.63		.47
high		.67		.15**		.11**		.23*		.61
Shared custody arrangement		1.70		.63		.24		2.36		2.51
Sex child (ref.: boy)		.81		1.23		1.68		1.39		1.20
Age child (ref.: 12+ years)		.50		1.18		.73		.51		1.84
Constant	.31**	.22	.30**	.38	.23**	.65	.24**	.20	.25**	.10*
Model -2 log likelihood	173.22	157.75	172.50	159.55	151.97	134.83	144.03	131.57	168.56	159.75
Chi square	2.37	17.13	6.37	18.57	12.14	28.69	8.52	17.95	7.03	15.12
Significance model	.883	.311	.383	.234	.119	.02	.202	.265	.318	.443
D*f*	6	15	6	15	6	15	6	15	6	15
R square (Nagelkerke)	.02	.16	.06	.17	.12	.27	.09	.18	.07	.14
N	144	143	144	143	144	143	144	143	144	143

* p < .05; ** p < .01

DISCUSSION

This study examined the importance of fathers' residential proximity for post-divorce coparenting and children's adjustment. We hypothesised that mothers would more actively promote positive interactions between fathers and children in the child's presence (cohesive coparenting) when fathers lived nearby. We also expected that fathers' proximity combined with cohesive coparenting would reduce children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. These hypotheses were not supported by our data. We rather demonstrated that mothers declared higher levels of cohesive coparenting when fathers had frequent phone or e-mail conversations with children. Moreover, both cohesive coparenting and fathers' proximity had positive and independent effects on children's adjustment, although the effects varied strongly with the nature of the difficulties. Fathers' proximity predicted lower levels of behavioural difficulties and higher levels of pro-social behaviour. Higher levels of cohesive coparenting related to lower levels of behavioural difficulties, hyperactivity difficulties and difficulties with peers.

The results suggest, first, that communication technologies partly substitute for physical distance regarding coparenting. Mothers promote remote fathers who contact frequently their children by phone or e-mails, probably because these fathers demonstrate concerns about children's everyday lives despite the geographical distance. In turn, fathers are certainly more likely to call or email their children when mothers trust fathers and facilitate their involvement in coparental interaction and childcare. Moreover, frequent phone or e-mail conversations between fathers and children may be combined with parental telecommunication, which facilitate coparenting practices (Ganong et al., 2012). Compared with in-person contacts, telecommunications create less opportunity for conflict or accusation of 'surveillance' between ex-partners (Miller, 2009).

While parents in effective coparenting relationships might be discouraged from moving farther away, proximity offers no guarantee that cohesive coparenting will occur. Staying or moving out of the area after union dissolution appears to relate more to other characteristics (remarriage, parents' work statuses, shared custody arrangement, time since separation) than cohesive coparenting. Thus, parents living apart have not necessarily poor coparenting relationships.

The same reasoning could be applied to children's adjustment: fathers living close to their children have not necessarily an affectionate and supportive relationship with them, such as warmth and limit-setting, which would benefit to children's development. However, our findings showed that children with fathers in immediate vicinity had lower chances of experiencing severe (anti-social) behavioural difficulties, regardless the level of cohesive coparenting and father-child contact frequency. We identify two possible reasons for this. (1) Closer homes have reduced the disruptive effect caused by parental separation by enabling children to stay in their familiar surroundings. (2) Residential propinquity is necessary for children to benefit from the presence of their nonresident fathers. Even in the era of high speed travel and ubiquitous telecommunications, affection, disclosure and parent monitoring require regular co-presence, shared activities and routines that cannot be fully achieved via communication technologies and occasional visits (Yarosh & Abowd, 2009). The effect of proximity was particularly strong for children who lived close to Swiss-born, highly educated fathers, probably because they could benefit from fathers' resources (education, social capital), which may have contributed to their behavioural development and their pro-social skills. The stronger effect among older children possibly results from the longer time spent living in proximity to nonresident fathers.

The relationship quality between fathers and children may have mediated the positive relation between father's proximity and children's adjustment.

The data have limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted cross-sectionally so that we cannot exclude the possibility of reverse causality: fewer difficulties in the child's development favouring fathers' proximity and cohesive coparenting (Dunn et al., 2004; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Follow-up studies could also track residential moves over time and their effects. Moves just before the interview, for instance, would probably impact later on children's development. These issues are critical and highlight the urgent necessity of longitudinal research in this domain. Secondly, questions regarding father-child contact, children difficulties and coparenting were particularly subject to subjectivity and social desirability. Because studies based on fathers' reports of nonresident children also generate biases (Schaeffer et al., 1991), it would be fruitful to collect data from various informants (e.g. parents, teachers and children). Thirdly, the measure of fathers' involvement was limited to contact frequency. Flaws of this single indicator to capture fathers' contribution to children well-being and adaptations to distance (longer visits, investment at particularly important moments in children's lives) have been highlighted elsewhere (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Cashmore et al., 2008; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Future research would benefit from considering a wider range of dimensions of father-child and father-mother relationships, including negative aspects like abusive parenting, conflict and divorce litigation, which are likely to condition coparenting and the distance between parents' homes. Finally, although the sample was randomly selected, its small size limited the statistical power of our regression coefficients. Our findings are robust to alternative specifications, increasing our confidence in the findings, but our study should be replicated on larger samples when appropriate data are available. In particular, further efforts should be employed to identify the mechanisms through which distance affects children.

Despite these limitations, our study provides new insight into the role of fathers' residential proximity on coparenting and children's adjustment. The rise of an intensively mobile society challenges families to ensure the physical co-presence of their members over time and across space. Family dissolutions contribute to this phenomenon. Parents living apart from their children have to travel regularly and use communication technologies to stay aware of, and involved in, their children's lives. However, even in the age of digital and mobile technologies, our findings show that residential proximity still matters for children's well-being. Frequent contacts by phone or emails can help mitigate for distance when fathers are coparenting, but are insufficient to significantly contribute to children's adjustment. In a mobile society, residential immobility is then paradoxically a telling feature of post-divorce family organisation. This calls for more attention to spatial and mobility dimensions in divorce research. Finally, the significance of the mother's promotion of fathers to their children provides new evidence that relationship between parents plays a central role in the father-child relationship. This underlines the importance of examining family systems that extend beyond single relationships and beyond the household.

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